WASHTENAW COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY Founded December 17, 1857 FEBRUARY 1980

WASHTENAW IMPRESSIONS

HISTORICAL HAPPENINGS

Chelsea Historical Society—Meets 8 p.m. second Monday of month at McKune Memorial Library, 221 South Main Street.

Dexter Historical Society—The seventh annual pioneer crafts fair of the Dexter Area Historical Society will be held from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturday, March 15, in the Dexter High School gymnasium, featuring 60 to 65 artists and craftsmen, all demonstrating their techniques.

In addition, there will be "ole tyme" music by players of rattlebones, dulcimer, fiddle and piano and the Cobblestone Farm Country Dancers will perform nineteenth century dances. Lunch will be available. Admission donation is $1 for adults, 50 cents for high school age. Younger children, free.

Manchester Historical Society—Meets at 8 p.m. fourth Monday of month, alternately at the Methodist and Emanuel United Church of Christ. The February 25 meeting will be at Emanuel.

Milan Historical Society—Meets at 7:30 p.m. third Wednesday of month at the Hack house.

Saline Historical Society—Meets 8 p.m. third ~~Wednesday~~ Tuesday at the Saline High School library.

Ypsilanti Historical Society—Jane Salcau will again demonstrate decorating Ukrainian-style Easter eggs Sunday, March 30 at the museum.

NEW WORD FOR TODAY

Philately, of course, is the collection and study of postage and imprinted stamps. But do you know what the science or collection and study of postcards is called? According to Dr. Frank Whitehouse, Jr., it is deltiology.

PRESIDENT ANGELL'S MISSION, REST OF 'U-M CHINA CONNECTION' TO BE EXPLORED AT WCHS MEETING

U-M President James Burrill Angell's 1880 mission to China is only part of "The U-M's China Connection" to be explored at the WCHS meeting at 8 p.m. Thursday, February 28, at the Salvation Army, Huron at Arbana.

Dr. Richard M. Doolen, assistant director of the Michigan Historical Collections at Bentley Library, will speak. He is an East Lansing native who did all his academic work at the U-M up to and including his Ph.D. in United States history.

He taught in the history department of Ohio University at Athens for nine years before returning to Ann Arbor in 1975 to take his present position.

The library has a rather large collection documenting the China connection, including diaries of President Angell's wife and daughter while in Peking. Dr. Doolen is involved in the library's current project of collecting materials on the recent rapprochement with China.

TIME IS GOING, GOING . . . WCHS AUCTION MARCH 14; LOTS OF DONATIONS NEEDED—OLD, NEW, USED, BAKED

A large album of old postcards, a wooden hall "tree" or coat rack, an IBM electric typewriter, valuable beer steins, an old hand-crank ice cream freezer, an antique duck decoy, antique picture frames of various shapes.

Two hours of home improvement work, an hour of legal services, your family portrait by Sam Sturgis, Milton Kemnitz drawings and prints, two former U-M stadium seats.

A hand-crocheted table cloth, old books and framed prints, a large old canning kettle with outsize thermometer, new fondue pot, coffee mill, vacuum cleaner, jewel boxes and costume jewelry.

These are among early donations for the second annual WCHS museum benefit auction at 7 p.m. Friday, March 14, at the Home and Boat Show at the U-M Track and Tennis Building on Ferry Field. The show will open at 5 p.m. Friday and run through Sunday, March 16.

Auction chairman Hazel Proctor is lining up a number of other items such as dinners, weekenders and a hayride but the help of all members is needed.

Lots more items, large or small, of all types are needed—not just antiques and collectibles but used garden and hand tools, baked goods, what have you. Your white elephant may be someone else's treasure.

If you have a donation or will bake something please call Jewel Reynolds at ~~663-8159~~ or Co-chairman Lois Foyle at 663-8159 after 7 p.m. to arrange delivery or pick-up. Please call in your donation today.

Many of the show exhibitors donate too and Auctioneers Lloyd Braun and Jerry Helmer are donating their time.

YPSI ELECTS OFFICERS

Mrs. William (Ann) McCarthy has been elected president of the Ypsilanti Historical Society for 1980. Mrs. Frank Burgess is vice-president. Mrs. Donald (Dottie) Disbrow and Fred Peters will continue in their respective posts as secretary and treasurer. Mrs. Disbrow is also archivist of the museum.

THE SERPENT THAT WENT TO CHURCH

Bob Eliason charmed his audience at the WCHS January meeting at the Stearns Building on the U-M's North Campus with his three "Snakes in the Brass", archaic musical instruments.

The shape of the earliest one, the serpent, readily suggests its name. The later serpents, the bass-horn and ophicleide, are modified and less recognizable as serpents. All three were blasted off the musical scene by tubas.

"The first solid evidence of the existence of a serpent among bass instruments was the appointment in 1602 of a serpent player and bassoon player at the Cathedral of Avignon in France," said Dr. Eliason, who is curator of musical instruments at Henry Ford Museum in Dearborn.

"There is an earlier story of the instrument's invention about 1590 by another French cleric but this wasn't really written down until about 1743.

"The serpent is made of pieces of wood hollowed out and glued back together. Over the wood is stretched some linen cloth and then black leather--the leather to try to keep the cracks in the wood from leaking. It's about eight feet long (if straightened) and has a mouthpiece somewhat like a trombone." He then played it.

"The serpent was used largely in French churches for the first couple of hundred years of its existence, supporting singing where there was no organ. The tone ressembles somewhat the male voice, and was quite well received and even treasured for its role in supporting singing.

"It wasn't long however before it started to crawl out of the churches and into some of the orchestra pits. It soon also struck up with the military bands in the late 1700's and even began 'poisoning' English music festivals.

"There were a number of fine soloists on the serpent—really fine clerical players but also fine players in bands and concert series."

He played "Greensleeves" from the seventeenth century and then a couple of marches from "Bach for the 'Cello" transcribed by Charles Krane.

Courtesy of speaker

PLAYING SERPENT
Robert E. Eliason with archaic instrument.

"The serpent eventually even slithered across to the United States. I was interested to find a newspaper account of a soloist named Mr. Young in New York in 1835.

"A reviewer in a New York newspaper the next day said something like this:

'Mr. Young played a solo on his keyed serpent last night. His tone was beautiful. He was able to reach a high F sharp in a nice round tone and to those of you who know the difficulties . . . he executed it quite well.'

"Then the reviewer went on to say, 'But New York hears too much of the noisy part of the orchestra and people with good taste have remarked about this. We hear too many solos by trumpet and trombone players and if Mr. Young and his serpent are added to this triumvirate, why next season New York will be blown away.'

"The serpent is an instrument which seemed to invite a particular kind of musical expression, and, although I can only paraphrase it, Berlioz explained this in his orchestration book very clearly, that the instrument was more suited to the macabre, songs of death and things of this nature.

"Many of the eighteenth century composers and opera composers wrote for serpent, but its character was sort of defined by this idea that it was for things associated with the devil or the macabre or death.

"The serpent lived a long and useful life—for more than 250 years people who knew it best found it a very useful and fine instrument.

"I have another instrument that I just recently acquired here tonight which was an improvement on the serpent—sort of half-way between the serpent and the next one. It is called a bass-horn. It really is nothing more than a brass serpent made in a shape that's a little easier to hold, at least they said it was. I found I had to put a strap on it to be able to hold it.

"The bass-horn was invented by a virtuoso player of the serpent by the name of Alexandre Frichot. He was the son of a cook in the service of the Duke of Burgundy. He was born in Versailles palace and grew up in Paris. He fled Paris at the time of the Revolution, came to England and was found about 1790 in festival orchestras around London.

"During the 1790's he developed this instrument as an improvement on the serpent. There is a method book for this instrument whose title goes something like this: *Complete Scale and Gamut for the Bass-horn*, published by G: Astor, music instrument maker and music seller.

"You probably know better George Astor's nephew, John Jacob Astor, who made his fortune in furs. John Jacob actually worked in his uncle's shop for a time, so you might say he worked his way up from serpents to mink and ermine.

"The bass-horn was played in a virtuoso manner by several players, too. It was said Frichot could play the Corelli sonata which the bass-player Dragonetti used as a showpiece.

"The bass-horn was a very short-lived instrument, almost obsolete before it was born. It went out of existence along with the serpent about 1850, when it was overtaken by the ophicleide."

Dr. Eliason played "In The Good Old Summertime" on the bass-horn.

"In the last throes of their death, the serpent and bass-horn were given a whole bunch of keys to try to keep up with the newer ophicleide. The British squashed it down and put a brace down the middle of it and played it with one hand backward so they could carry it around a little better.

"That may sound disastrous because you had to finger the other way but on the serpent it really doesn't make much difference which finger you pick up first.

"In any case the composers had so tangled their scales with sharps and flats that the serpent could no longer negotiate them and it was even outnumbered and outclassed by valve instruments and other keyed instruments and even replaced in the very churches where it was born by pipe organs.

"Ophicleide literally means 'keyed serpent'. It is another serpent with a better set of keys, with holes more evenly spaced along its tube. With the serpent you had to put the holes where your fingers could reach them—not where they should be according to the length of the tube.

"The ophicleide corrected all this. It put the holes where they should be, and, because technology had progressed, the key mechanism could be easily made with springs and axles and screws well enough so it didn't get out of order.

"The ophicleide is really the bass of a family of instruments. First the soprano was invented about 1815, then about 1817 in Paris the ophicleide was first made by a fellow nicknamed Halary (real name Jean Hillaire Asté). He made it in several sizes, not only the bass in B flat which this is but also a bass in C and E flat and F. The sopranos were really just keyed bugles.

"The ophicleide plays with a much evener scale. It doesn't have any difficulty whatsoever with sharps and flats. You can play all of the chromatic notes very easily.

"The ophicleide got into symphony orchestras in the 1830's and 1840's and many fine composers—Brahms, Wagner and Mendelssohn—as well as many lesser composers wrote orchestral parts for the ophicleide. However, the ophicleide didn't completely escape the tradition of the serpent, having a character of something to do with the devil, death and so on.

"Some of its major parts are of this nature. Berlioz wrote "The Desiree, The March of Death for Two Ophicleides" in "The Damnation of Faust"—you might say, Faust is sent to hell with two ophicleides. It also had humorous parts as in Mendelssohn's "Midsummer Night's Dream" overture where it represents at one point one of the characters snoring."

He played some duets from a set of ten by a French composer, Hartman.

"The ophicleide really was a pretty good instrument and it was unfortunate that it had so little time to prove itself, to attract literature and be played with other instruments in ensembles.

"It was very shortly put out of business by the tuba that came along in the 1830's and 1840's and was predominant by the 1850's. There were ophicleides still being made however up until the early twentieth century—as late as 1916 they were still offered in some French musical instrument catalogues.

"The serpent, of course, attracted a lot of amusing comments about its shape and the ophicleide also attracted stories and jokes about its size and shape.

"One of the amusing stories that was published in an American magazine in the 1840's was a story of the French fighting in Spain. It seems that a unit of the French army had been ambushed by the Moors. The band was with this particular unit and the ophicleide player was embarrassed by his instrument.

"They were all trying to retreat as quickly as possible. He thought seriously of dropping the thing and running, but seeing an Arab horseman bearing down on him he began to think of the prospects of slavery in the desert, and as they say, necessity is the inventor of many a strange resource. He turned toward the Arab horseman and raised his ophicleide musket-fashion. The Arab horseman not knowing what sort of wild invention the Frenchman was aiming at him, turned and ran away. The ophicleidist then returned to his unit with a better opinion of his instrument. The story was the amusement of the French army for many a day afterwards.

"One wonders what these instruments might have sounded like if they had lasted a little longer. I often wonder what the ophicleide might have sounded like close up to the microphone in a dance band." He played "Melancholy Baby".

Of his performance, Dr. Howard Ross commented from the audience that "one thinks the saxophone is being given birth to there".

"You're probably right. This was invented in Paris some years before the saxophone and certainly Adolphe Sax would have seen one. The technology is the same but there is one basic difference in principle. On an ophicleide, all of the keys except one are closed and by pressing your fingers you open them. On the saxophone it's the other way around. Almost all the keys are open and you close them by pressing down.

"Even the serpent is capable of playing modern music too." He played "Dark Town Strutters Ball."

"The tuba drove the ophicleide out of business because the latter gained a reputaion of having a tone quality that would not blend with other instruments. Many orchestra-

tion books through the nineteenth century give it a bad time. They claim its voice is bellowing, ugly, a few notes are not quite as strong, and it has a little unevenness. The tuba had an even scale, greater range and operated with the same three valves that all the other brass instruments did.

"Some serpents and ophicleides were made in the United States but the bass-horn probably only in England. Some metal serpents were made occasionally of copper, and last summer I saw a wooden ophicleide on sale."

A listener, Don Proctor, suggested the serpent would be an ideal instrument for "The Big Apple".

"The serpent will live on because of its unique shape. The ophicleide will live on in literature if nothing else. You now are among the select few people who can appreciate a little poem in *The Space Child's Mother Goose:*

Venus vermiculate,
Be my own BEM (bug-eyed monster).
How bright is that eye
On its seven-foot stem.

Croon in that sweet
Ophicledeian voice,
And we two shall in true
Symbiosis rejoice."

WCHS BOOTH NEEDS HELPERS MARCH 14-16

Free passes for parking and the door are available for volunteers who help staff the WCHS exhibit booth during the Home Show March 14-16 at the U-M Track and Tennis Building.

If you can help please call Ethelyn Morton at 662-2634.

Mary Steffek Blaske of the Historical Society of Michigan staff who has worked at Greenfield Village will design the WCHS exhibit. Dr. John Dann and Hazel Proctor will assist with selection and access to artifacts. Wystan and Catherine Stevens will transport and set-up. The booth space was donated by show promoters Pat and John Danovich.

GSWC FEBRUARY TOPIC 'RESEARCH IN EUROPE'

"Research in Europe" will be Ralph Muncy's topic at the Genealogy Society of Washtenaw County meeting at 2:30 p.m. Sunday, February 24, at Washtenaw Community College. The second session of the beginner's class will be held at 1 p.m. There will also be a personal help session before the regular meeting and program.

DUES COMING IN: PLEASE SEND YOURS

Thanks to all the readers who have sent in their 1980 dues. Angela Dobson Welch, membership chairman, had received 101 memberships and about $575 by presstime and reported more coming in each day.

Please don't forget to send in your dues to Mrs. Welch, 2220 Glendaloch Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48104. Make checks payable to Washtenaw County Historical Society.

Annual dues are $5 for individual membership, $9 for a couple. Senior citizen members are $4 individual or $7 for a couple. Persons already members of another local historical society in the county may deduct $1 from any of the above. Life membership is $100 for an individual or $150 for a couple.

Commercial memberships are Patron, $100; Sponsor, $75; Donor, $50; and Friend, $25.

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WASHTENAW COUNTY
HISTORICAL SOCIETY
MEETING

8:00 pm THURSDAY
FEBRUARY 28, 1980

SALVATION ARMY
West Huron at Arbana
Ann Arbor, Michigan

Mr. and Mrs. Lawrence Ziegler
537 Riverview Drive
Ann Arbor, Michigan 48104

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